DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 387 814 CS 215 082

AUTHOR Nero, Shondel J.
TITLE Not Quite E.S.L.: Teaching English to Speakers of Other Englishes.
PUB DATE 24 Mar 95
NOTE 11p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (46th, Washington, DC, March 23-25, 1995).
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (Opinion/Position Papers, Essays, etc.) (120) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Creoles; Cultural Awareness; *Cultural Differences; English Curriculum; Higher Education; *Immigrants; Language Attitudes; *Language Variation; Multicultural Education; Secondary Education; Standard Spoken Usage; *Student Needs; Teacher Role
IDENTIFIERS Educational Issues; *English (Caribbean); Historical Background; *New York City Board of Education

ABSTRACT

In the last decade the United States has witnessed a significant increase in the number of immigrants from the officially English-speaking Caribbean. The fundamental question confronting educators of Caribbean students is how best to negotiate the meeting ground between the variety of English-based creoles and the school-based standard English. To begin, teachers should have some understanding of the evolution of English-based creoles in the Caribbean, where highly stratified societies set up by Europeans usually consisted of a small ruling minority and a large mass of mainly non-European laborers from many different language groups (mostly slaves from West Africa and indentured laborers from Asia and Europe). The speakers of these different language groups eventually developed an auxiliary contact language drawn mainly from the European language of the ruling elite. This contact language evolved eventually into creole. On arrival in public schools or colleges in New York, today's Caribbean immigrants confront the politics of placement, assessment, and language policy. Since English is their native language, state law prevents educators from putting them in anything but mainstream classes for native speakers, yet they do have language problems. Explanation of some common differences illustrate how a teacher might respond in the classroom. The extent to which students will succeed depends on the teachers' understanding of the sensitive cultural issues involved; they must validate the cultural differences while at the same time help Caribbean students to gain proficiency. (TB)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED 387 814

NOT QUITE E.S.L:

TEACHING ENGLISH TO SPEAKERS

OF OTHER ENGLISHES

PAPER PRESENTED AT THE

CONFERENCE FOR COLLEGE COMPOSITION & COMMUNICATION

WASHINGTON, DC - MARCH 24, 1995

SHONDEL J. NERO

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

S Nero

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

☑ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

CS215082

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

ABSTRACT

In the last decade, the United States has witnessed a significant increase in the number of immigrants from the officially English-speaking Caribbean. With this new influx, schools are being challenged to educate students whose Englishes seem markedly different from what school authorities have traditionally defined as "English". In the strictest sense, this is an issue of defining language boundaries, but in a real sense, it is a question of language attitudes. This paper addresses the challenges of teaching standard school-based English to students whose native languages are varieties of English-based creoles. I am particularly concerned with pedagogical issues of reading and writing instruction, and with the political issues of language policy, placement and assessment. The paper argues that placing Caribbean English-based creole speakers into E.S.L. classes is a mistake given that the receptive skills of creole speakers far exceed those of non-native speakers; it argues for teachers to familiarize themselves with Caribbean culture and with the features of Caribbean English-based creoles. Finally, it discusses the attitudes that Caribbean students bring to school about their language, and offers strategies for teaching school-based English to creole speakers.

Introduction

In 1992, Deborah Sontag's New York Times article, **Caribbean pupils' English seems barrier, not bridge** (Nov.28, p.1), brought popular attention to the educational plight of recent Caribbean immigrants in New York City schools. Quoting statistics from the New York City Department of City Planning, Sontag stated that twenty one percent of new immigrants enrolled in New York City schools hail from the officially English-speaking Caribbean. She painted a gloomy profile of undereducated Caribbean students whose Englishes are, at best, enigmatic for the American teacher. She described many of these students as floundering or "misplaced in special education classes or left on their own to sink or swim in the mainstream" (p.22). While one cannot assume that Sontag speaks for educators (she is, after all, a journalist), her article raises issues that ought to be of concern to educational administrators and practitioners. The issues are at once pedagogical and political. In strictly linguistic terms, Sontag's article raises the issue of language teaching and learning, and defining language boundaries. But in a more real world sense, she invites a much needed debate on the larger, more complex questions of changing immigration patterns, ethnic and linguistic diversity, language attitudes, and educational responses to cultural diversity. These issues are certainly not mutually exclusive.

Sontag's article seems to frame the linguistic issue from a deficit perspective. In other words, to the extent that the variety of English spoken by a student is at odds with the norms of school-based standard English, that variety is then perceived as a "barrier". The language of many recent immigrants from the officially English-speaking Caribbean presents a formidable challenge to the American education system, which must now cope with students from a multiplicity of ethnic, racial, linguistic and socio-economic backgrounds whose Englishes seem markedly different from what school authorities have traditionally defined as "English". I am particularly concerned with language attitudes vis-a-vis these "other Englishes" spoken by Caribbean students (linguistically referred to as Caribbean English-based creoles), and the extent to which these attitudes impact on larger questions of language policy and planning, and on more pedagogical issues of placement, assessment, reading and writing instruction. The fundamental question then becomes: how best to negotiate the meeting ground between the English-based creoles that Caribbean students bring to school and the school-based standard English that American education

(not unlike other education systems) has traditionally privileged? In order to address this question, one should have at least a rudimentary understanding of the evolution of English-based creoles in the Caribbean, and the factors responsible for the current influx and changing profile of officially English-speaking Caribbean immigrants into America, especially into New York City.

Caribbean English-based creoles

Caribbean English-based creoles emerged as a direct result of European colonial expansion between the fifteenth and nineteenth centuries in the Caribbean. Europeans established autocratic, rigidly stratified societies in the Caribbean for four centuries, which consisted of a ruling minority from some European nation and a large mass of mainly non-European laborers from many different language groups (mostly slaves from West Africa and indentured laborers from Asia and Europe). Creole expert Derek Bickerton (1980) claimed that speakers of these different language groups first evolved some form of auxiliary contact language, native to none of them (known as a "pidgin"), and that this language, suitably expanded, eventually became the native (creole) languages of the Caribbean communities which exist today. Superficially, creoles bear the closest resemblance to their European "colonizer" language (British English in the case of the officially English-speaking Caribbean). This is because the bulk of the vocabulary is drawn from the colonizer's language. It should be pointed out that it is the predominance of English lexicon that sometimes leads to the misconception of Caribbean English-based creoles as "deformed" versions of English. On the contrary, creoles are rule-governed languages (as are all languges) which emerged out of colonial circumstances. But creoles, like most non-standard varieties of languages, have never been viewed (at least socially) as languages in their own right. As languages generally spoken by socially disfavored groups, creoles are certainly stigmatized.

Linguists usually describe the language of creole speakers along a creole continuum ranging from a **basilect** (most conservative creole) to a **mesolect** (mid range, less creolized) to an **acrolect** (closest to the standard variety). Generally speaking, there is a correlation between low socio-economic status and basilectal speech, and conversely, high social status and acrolectal speech. However, this is not an absolute phenomenon. Many Caribbean creole speakers move back and forth along the creole continuum as the need arises to inherit various identities and to adjust to social context.

Caribbean Migration

Over the last twenty five years, the profile of the Caribbean immigrant has been changing. In his 1994 book, Reinventing Urban Education, Professor Francisco Rivera-Batiz of Teachers' College, Columbia University offers a profound analysis of the changing demographic and social structures of urban America and the impact of these changes on urban education. Rivera-Batiz' work and that of other scholars on urban education point to very specific factors that account for the changing profile of Caribbean immigrants. Bonnett (1981), for example, explained that the U.S. Immigration Act of 1965 gave preference to highly skilled immigrants. Thus, Caribbean immigrants who came to the United States in the post-1965 years up until the late 1970s were typically middle class, better educated and mesolect or acrolect-dominant speakers and writers. However, political crises, economic stagnation, and deteriorating educational systems throughout the Caribbean in the last fifteen years have triggered the exodus of large numbers of Caribbean peoples to the United States, most of whom are poor, undereducated, basilect-dominant creole speakers. These are the immigrants of which Sontag speaks and by whom American educators are most challenged.

Language Policy and Placement

On arrival in public schools or colleges in New York, recent Caribbean immigrants confront the politics of placement. Those who come from officially English-speaking countries are not legally entitled to ESL or bilingual education under New York State law (the argument goes: if your government says your language is English, then it is). Yet, despite the "English" label given to their languages, most recent immigrants **actually** speak and write basilectal to mesolectal varieties of English-based creoles. Thus, politically, schools are constrained by state laws and find themselves in an anomalous position where they are forced to place creole-speaking students into mainstream classes for native speakers of English. This seems to be a reasonable alternative, except that many teachers are not adequately prepared to address the linguistic needs of creole speakers. Furthermore, despite state laws, there is a growing trend of placing Caribbean students whose Englishes are distinctly creolized into ESL classes. Not surprisingly, many recent Caribbean immigrant students who are placed into ESL classes are insulted by the ESL label for no other reason than they have always **perceived** their native language as "English" (a notion

inculcated by British colonization). In this regard, Lawrence Carrington, a linguist at the University of the West Indies says, "Few people in the English-speaking Caribbean - and the term itself is an inexactitude - really speak standard English at home....but most think they do, and therein lies the problem." I would argue, though, that placing English-based creole speakers into ESL classes is a mistake for two reasons: 1) most English-based creole speakers have a vocabulary base in English far beyond non-native speakers of English and 2) their receptive skills in standard English far exceed those of non-native speakers. Hence, English-based creoles speakers would be better served in what Gopaul-McNicol (1993) describes as English as a Second Dialect (ESD) classes, as is done in Canada, or, as I would advocate, in mainstream classes with teachers who are appropriately trained.

In terms of implementing a language policy in the United States, English-based creoles present a formidable challenge since they are so varied. Unlike the relative uniformity of Haitian creole, Caribbean English-based creoles encompass a wide range of syntactic and lexical features, which would make it difficult to construct a bilingual program. One of the goals of my research is to identify the most common syntactic, lexical and discourse features of Caribbean English-based creoles and to analyse the extent to which those features manifest themselves in students' writings as they try to approximate school-based standard English. I hope to make my findings accessible to writing teachers, and to offer some guidelines on facilitative ways to respond to the writing of creole speakers.

Teaching Caribbean Students

From a pedagogical perspective, English-based creole speakers challenge both the cultural sensitivity and linguistic expertise of the teacher. The extent to which language teaching to Caribbean creole-speaking students is successful would depend, among other factors, on whether the teacher frames the students' language as a "barrier" or "bridge" (borrowing Sontag's terms). Smitherman, Labov and other sociolinguists would argue that the teacher in this context is not only responding to the strictly linguistic features and rhetorical styles of students' speech and writing, but also to the ethnocultural identity of the student that finds its expression in language. Thus, the teacher will be challenged to validate the culturally embedded Englishes of Caribbean students while helping them to gain proficiency in the conventions of school-based standard English. Such

teaching would entail more than token gestures. London (1980) suggests that American educators in planning for and interacting with Caribbean students will require among other support systems "a sense of Caribbean history, and a sensitivity towards the backgrounds of students, their values, and culture patterns, their environment and the specific influences which impinge upon them" (p.11). London further suggests that American educators will need to add into their repertoire of understanding "a sensitivity towards non-American phenomena; that speech and writing patterns may not necessarily be incorrect, but different; that British oriented spelling and writing styles (legacies of British colonization) will, in time, be gradually adapted to the American mode" (p.12). Teachers should also familiarize themselves with some common features of Caribbean English-based creoles. Edwards (1983) who has done extensive research on the language of Caribbean students in England has summarized the general features of Caribbean English-based creoles as follows:

1) Creoles do not usually mark plural nouns as English does:
Me have three brother and two sister.
The logic here is that the number makes it obvious that we are dealing with plural nouns. But when creole needs to show that it is referring to more than one person or thing and there are no plural words in the sentence, it use...*de...dem.*
De girl dem come here all the time.

2) There is no agreement between subject and verb:
The boy come here in the morning.

3) The creole verb does not inflect for tense; tense is indicated by context:
My mother come here yesterday.

4) Creole shows possession not with the genitive marker ' s of formal written English, but by the relative positions of possessor and possessed:
John hat.

5) Pronouns only show person and number. They don't usually show case or gender.
In Jamaican creole, we find: a. me we
b. you unu
c. him/it dem
Thus, one might say: *Me see him brudda yestaday* (I saw his brother yesterday).

6) The verb "to be" in creole is largely redundant. Both adjectives and verbs and, in some situations, nouns and locatives can follow the subject:
Winston coming; Winston tall; Winston the father; Winston there.

7) There is no separate passive form in creole:
The food prepare bad = The food was badly prepared.

8) Words that begin with "thr" are typically pronounced as "tr": "tree" for "three".

9) The letter "h" is often deleted in initial position: "ouse" for "house"
"h" is often added before initial vowels: "hegg" for "egg"; "hiron" for "iron".

10) While not a creole feature, teachers should be aware that students from the English-speaking Caribbean typically use British spellings:
British: *analyse; colour; labelled* American: *analyze; color; labeled*

Typically, creole-speaking students will use most of the above mentioned forms in their speech. However, in their writing, the most common features exhibited are the lack of inflectional marking for case, number, person and gender in pronouns and nouns, as well as a lack of inflectional marking of verbs to show tense. Occasionally, creole speakers will overcompensate for the absence of inflection in creole, which leads to hypercorrection (deers, cutted, sinked, he are). Creole speakers also have difficulty with linkage words (because, since, if), consequential intonational indicators (intonation is used differently and carries a greater functional load in creole than it does in standard English), abstract nouns and evaluative adjectives.

In addition to these syntactic features, Roberts (1983) points out some psychological factors that influence successful language learning. One such factor is what he calls the "linguistic inferiority complex" (p.234), where the creole speaker is led to believe from an early age that her native speech is always wrong. This linguistic inferiority complex develops from the earliest period of acquisition of language and continues throughout the school years as a result of constant negative (usually vehement) correction by parents, relatives and teachers. It gives rise to other strategies dealing with the standard language. For example, the learner, because of insecurities, avoids the use of complex syntactic structures in written standard English lest she suffers the indignity of being reprimanded or corrected by the teacher. The result is often a loss of expressiveness in writing. Another psychological factor, according to Roberts, relates to the areas of commands, modality and interrogation. Roberts (1983) cited the work of Craig (1971b) who found that basilect-dominant speakers show a low incidence of verbs of probability and possibility. In the area of modality, it seems that creole speakers generally prefer <u>not</u> to use modal, verbal or lexical indicators of doubt or probability, but render this information by intonation. Thus, while the creole-speaking student may not find it difficult to understand or recognize standard English indicators of probability - *perhaps, it is possible that, probably and so forth* - she is less likely to use these structures in standard English if she is accustomed to rendering this meaning by intonation or other devices. Teachers who are aware of these psychological factors will be better

prepared to address the linguistic needs of creole-speaking students.

The ultimate success of teaching standard English to creole speakers will depend on the language attitudes of both students and teachers. I would argue that the language classroom should be a forum for honest, meaningful discussion on the social stratification of language and on societal and personal attitudes towards languages, especially stigmatized varieties. Such discussions might inculcate an appreciation of the nature of language - the viability of linguistic systems and the distinction between the socially ascribed value of languages and dialects as opposed to their intrinsic, structural value. Discussions about language should not be token gestures. They should be ongoing, and accompanied by assignments and activities where students speak, read and write about their own English-based creoles and school-based standard English, comparing and contrasting the usage and purposes of both language varieties. Teachers can selectively use contrastive analysis strategies depending on the needs of their creole-speaking students to better understand the writing of their students. Labov (1981) claims that "American education has always been concerned with non-standard English, but primarily in a negative way. It has been the object to be overcome, rather than something to be studied and understood in its own right" (p.1).

Conclusion

This paper began by posing the question: how can educators negotiate the language Caribbean students bring to school and the language that American schools have traditionally privileged? To be sure, any attempt to respond to language difference must be considered within a historical, social-cultural framework. I have argued that teachers need to familiarize themselves with the history and culture of Caribbean students and with the features of Caribbean English-based creoles; that the classroom should be used as a forum for both teachers and students to confront their language attitudes and to discuss the nature of language. In a larger context, schools which are truly committed to multicultural education would commit funding to faculty development in teaching ethno-linguistically diverse students. The challenge is formidable and certainly costly, but given the rapidly changing "face" of America, schools will have no choice but to respond to ethno-linguistic diversity in the classroom.

REFERENCES

Bickerton, D. (1981). Roots of language. Ann Arbor: Karoma Publishers Inc.

Bonnett, A. (1981). Institutional adaptation of West Indian immigrants to America. Washington, DC: University Press of America.

Edwards, V. (1983). Language in multicultural classrooms. London: Batsford Academic and Educational Ltd.

Gopaul-McNicol, S. (1993). Working with West Indian families. New York: Guilford Press.

Labov, W. (1981). The study of nonstandard English. Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English.

London, C. (1980). Teaching and learning with Caribbean students. New York: (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED 196 977).

Rivera-Batiz, F. (Ed.) (1994). Reinventing urban education. New York: IUME Press, Teachers' College, Columbia University.

Roberts, P. (1983). Linguistics and language teaching. In L. Carrington (Ed.) Studies in Caribbean Language. St. Augustine, Trinidad: Society for Caribbean Linguistics, U.W.I.

Sontag, D. (1992, November 28). Caribbean pupils' English seems barrier, not bridge. The New York Times. ppA1,A22.